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ABSTRACT

Feedback, i.e., information provided by others regarding behavioral assets (positive feedback) and deficiencies (negative feedback), is commonly utilized in personal growth and training groups to bring about constructive personal change. Research on feedback sequence and valence has led to conflicting conclusions as to which sequence, a positive-to-negative or a negative-to-positive, enhances overall feedback acceptance by recipients. In an attempt to resolve this conflict, procedural differences in previous studies, e.g., self-disclosure level, feedback rating method, and sex of recipients were systematically varied along with feedback sequence and valence. Measures of the deliverers' reactions to feedback given were also obtained. Eight groups of subjects participated in structured group exercises and exchanged feedback. Results failed to confirm a sequence effect. Positive feedback was rated more credible, desirable, and impactful than negative by both deliverers and recipients. Deliverers rated negative feedback less credible than recipients; negative feedback led to less self-disclosure in subsequent group exercises. The results suggest that giving negative feedback may be a more threatening task than receiving it. (Author/JAC)

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RATINGS OF PERSONAL INFORMATION EXCHANGED IN GROUPS AS RELATED TO VALENCE AND SEQUENCE OF FEEDBACK AND AMOUNT OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

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Introduction

There exists a general concensus among practitioners and writers concerned with personal growth and training groups that such group activities as feedback, support, self-disclosure, and confrontation are essential to constructive personal change. However, little systematic research exists to reveal how best to employ these procedures. (Campbell and Dunnette, 1968; Gibb, 1971; Jacobs, 1974.)

Feedback in such groups refers to the process by which an individual is informed of the reactions of others to his behavior. Several studies (Jacobs, Jacobs, Gatz, and Schaible, 1973; Jacobs, Jacobs, Feldman and Cavior, 1973; Jacobs, Jacobs, Cavior, and Burke, 1974; and Schaible and Jacobs, 1975) have investigated the issue of enhancing feedback acceptance. If feedback is to be used effectively in order to bring about interpersonal growth, it follows that it is important to understand the factors which influence the degree to which the recipient of such feedback perceives the information as accurate and desirable. Clearly, utilization of the information by the recipients in order to enhance their interpersonal effectiveness is only likely to occur when the feedback is received in this fashion. The above mentioned studies have demonstrated that feedback acceptance is effected by a number of variables; the valence of the feedback, whether the feedback is emotional or behavioral, whether or not the source of the feedback is known, and whether positive or negative feedback is received first.

With respect to the issue of feedback sequence, i.e., whether positive or negative feedback is received first, the results of the two studies concerned with it have let to contradictory conclusions. Jacobs, Jacobs, Gatz, and

Schaible (1973) reported that a negative-to-positive sequence of feedback enhanced overall feedback acceptance, while Schaible and Jacobs (1975) found the opposite, i.e., a positive-to-negative sequence of feedback produced greater overall acceptance.

The purpose of the present study was twofold; first, to reconcile the disagreement between the two previous studies regarding the effect of feedback sequence on acceptance, and secondly, to investigate the relationship between several new factors and feedback acceptance. In attempting to reconcile the different findings of the two previous studies, these studies were examined for procedural differences which might account for the discrepant results. The studies were found to differ in the extent to which participation in self-disclosure activities preceded feedback, in the freedom of participants to select the feedback to be rated, and in the sex of the participants. The present investigation systematically varied the first two variables and sampled both sexes to study the acceptability and effect of positive-to-negative and negative-to-positive feedback in groups.

With respect to the second purpose, the present study examined the following variables: Impact, i.e., How strongly subjects (Ss) reacted to the feedback that they received; Intent to improve, i.e., How much Ss intended to improve with respect to the feedback that they received; and 3 variables concerned with the person giving the feedback; 1.) How difficult the feedback items given were to select; 2.) How credible the person giving the feedback thought that the items which he/she selected were; and 3.) How desirable the person giving the feedback thought that the items which he/she selected were.

Method

Sixty-four undergraduates from psychology classes at an eastern university volunteered for a research project involving participation in sensitivity training

and were randomly assigned to eight eight-member groups consisting of four males and four females.

The experimental design was a mixed model 2x2x2x2x2 factorial (positive-to-negative sequence vs. negative-to-positive; self-disclosure vs. neutral exercises; choice by participants of feedback items to be rated vs. no choice, or rating method; sex of recipient; and positive vs. negative feedback, or valance,) with one repeated measure.

The procedure began with a warm-up in which each group member interacted in dyads with every other member of his group, discussing interesting topics each had selected. Next, Ss in high self-disclosure conditions first related significant life experiences, or answered such personal questions as "what do you like best about yourself?" Low self-disclosure Ss first performed a group concensus problem-solving exercise involving a rank order of items necessary for survival on the moon, or rank-ordered a list of leisure-time activities in terms of popularity.

Subjects rated the amount of self-disclosure exhibited by themselves and other group members after the first exercise. Each participant then selected feedback items for delivery to each group member rating the difficulty of selection, accuracy and desirability. Feedback was selected from all positive or all negative lists used in previous studies and containing words like cooperative, active, or uncooperative, passive. Feedback was delivered by the bombardment method, and recipients, after recording each item, either rated the first two items, or chose two from among all items to rate for credibility, desirability, impact, and intent to improve. Subjects who chose feedback items to rate then filled out a questionaire indicating what criteria they used in selecting items to be rated. Subjects then participated in their second exercise and feedback session using the same forms and procedures, except that the exercise and valence of feedback lists were changed.

Results

Recipients rated positive feedback as significantly more credible, desirable and impactful than negative feedback ($p < .001$, in all cases), deliverers rated the credibility and desirability of positive feedback as significantly higher ($p < .001$) and as easier to select ($p < .001$), and deliverers in the positive-to-negative sequence reported their feedback more difficult to select ($p < .001$).

Subjects who received negative feedback more often selected inaccurate feedback to rate, when permitted the opportunity to choose, than subjects receiving positive feedback ($p < .01$). Subjects in a positive-to-negative sequence reported more self-disclosure taking place on the subsequent exercise ($p < .001$). A positive-negative sequence of feedback resulted in a greater intent to improve ($p < .025$).

Discussion

The sequence in which feedback was delivered did not effect its credibility or desirability in the present study, suggesting the possibility that procedural artifacts may have been operating in both of the previous studies to produce the contradictory findings with respect to the sequence effect. However, it should be noted that for some variables in the present study, a sequence effect was obtained, indicating that overall, a positive-to-negative sequence may have a more beneficial effect on group behavior and feedback acceptance. More self-disclosure took place and a greater intent to improve was expressed by Ss when positive feedback preceded negative.

I have since conducted another study in which I examined the effect of sequence on feedback acceptance. In this study also, no significant sequence effect was obtained. However, in both studies, when the sequence was positive-to-negative, somewhat higher credibility ratings were obtained. In the most recent study the sequence effect approached significance ($p < .10$). Therefore,

my hunch is that a positive-to-negative sequence is generally to be preferred.

Results suggest that encouragement of positive feedback, rather than large amounts of negative feedback, may facilitate more productive group behavior. Negative feedback seems to suppress self-disclosure and arouse defensiveness in recipients. I suspect that the use of negative feedback in sensitivity groups may be analogous to the use of punishment in operant conditioning to the extent that both are complex variables that can produce undesirable side effects such as anger, anxiety, and response suppression, which have to be considered when they are to be employed. In the present study, anger was evident in the overt behavior of Ss when required to give negative feedback, and negative feedback led to suppression of self-disclosure. Jacobs, Jacobs, Gatz, and Schaible (1973) used a mood adjective checklist and found that Ss reported mild feelings of anxiety following the exchange of negative feedback. Like punishment, I believe that negative feedback can facilitate learning, but it must be judiciously employed with an awareness of the possible unwanted by-products. When group leaders feel that it is important to draw attention to an undesirable characteristic in a participant, but are concerned about a possible dampening effect on the self-disclosure level of the group or defensiveness on the part of the individual, then a possible alternative is to rephrase the negative feedback in positive terms, e.g., assertive instead of pushy, a good listener instead of too quiet, cooperative instead of passive, followed by a suggestion of experimenting with the opposite behavior for the sake of increasing one's behavior repertoire.

The finding that the deliverer of feedback likewise rated negative feedback as being less credible and desirable than positive, suggests that giving negative feedback may be as difficult a task for the deliverer as receiving negative feedback is for the recipient. Jacobs et al. (1973) noted that Ss had difficulty giving negative feedback and tended to add modifiers in delivering the feedback

which had the effect of reducing the negative impact, e.g., "you were a little passive or somewhat uncooperative." Being forced to give negative feedback appears to elicit a strong reaction from Ss. In the present study, Ss often expressed anger to group leaders when forced to give such feedback. This reaction may play an important part in subsequent ratings of, and reactions to negative feedback.

I recently went back and examined the data to see how the credibility ratings of the deliverer compared with those of the recipient. My guess was that since the feedback was not directed at the deliverer there would be less ego involvement, defensiveness, etc., and therefore less of a discrepancy between deliverers' ratings for positive and negative feedback. I was suprised to find that the deliverers rated the negative feedback that they gave less credible than the recipients of that same feedback ($p < .05$).

The "credibility gap", i.e., the ratings of positive feedback as more credible than negative, is a highly stable finding. The present study demonstrated its presence, not only in the recipient, but also in the deliverer of such feedback. Previous studies have shown its existence whether the feedback is genuine or counterfeit (Schaible, 1970), emotional or behavioral (Jacobs, Jacobs, Feldman, and Cavior, 1973), whether or not the source of the feedback is known (Jacobs, Jacobs, Cavior, and Burke, 1974), whether positive or negative feedback is received first (Jacobs, Jacobs, Gatz, and Schaible, 1973), and when the subjects (Ss) knew each other only briefly (one hour) as well as when they had worked together intensively for six weeks as members of a group treatment team in a group psychotherapy (Jacobs, 1974).

Subjects may use feedback rating forms for purposes other than to objectively rate feedback received. That this may be the case is suggested by the Choice Strategy Questionnaire data. The tendency was for Ss to choose the most accurate positive feedback and the least accurate negative feedback to rate. As mentioned

previously, Ss often expressed anger to group leaders when forced to give and receive negative feedback. It may be that Ss used the forms to work out their negative feelings toward the feedback by selecting the most inaccurate items and "giving 'em hell" on the rating form.

Finally, I don't believe that the finding that Ss in the negative-to-positive sequence condition found their feedback easier to select reflects facilitation of feedback selection in any meaningful sense. On at least two occasions, group leaders reported strong protest on the part of Ss who were required to deliver negative feedback first. Complaints received included statements to the effect that it was unfair to have all negative items and that none of the items were appropriate. That these Ss then reported that their feedback was easier to select suggests that what Ss most likely did was rate the feedback for difficulty of selection on the basis of some criteria other than the appropriateness of that feedback for the recipient, e.g., anything in order to get it over with, the first two items on the list, etc..

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